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*Published for the
Bexley Christadelphian Ecclesia (Dawn Fellowship)
by*



*Light Bible Publications,
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Bexley, Kent
DA5 1UB, England*

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VOLUME NINETEEN NUMBER FOUR

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Cover picture: Peaceful tropical beach



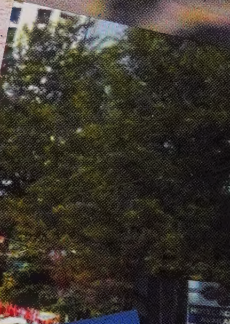
International problems the Bible's answer

Human Suffering

HUMAN SUFFERING IS not something that initially springs to mind as an 'international problem'. However on reflection most of us will accept that millions of people world-wide suffer because of war, famine, disease or natural disasters, to name but a few causes of suffering in the world. In December 2004 the world was horrified by the Tsunami that claimed the lives of nearly 300,000 people in countries as far apart as Indonesia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Somalia.

A powerful earthquake (magnitude 9 on the Richter scale) shook the area for eight minutes as pressure built up by the movement of two of the world's tectonic plates, was catastrophically released. The lower plate, carrying India, slipped beneath the upper plate carrying most of Southeast Asia. At the same time far below the Indian Ocean, at the epicentre of the earthquake, the sea floor thrust upwards by about 20 metres (65 feet). This upward thrust of the seafloor then triggered a series of geological events that were to devastate the lives of millions of people.

Billions of tonnes of seawater, forced upward by the movement of the seabed flowed away from the fault in a series of giant waves. The resulting tsunami raced across the ocean and on reaching the shoreline, it devastated huge swathes of the various countries affected.



The immediate reactions to this event were varied and the following are some examples of comments made:

- Robin Harger, a retired UN official, wrote an article detailing the failure of the global society to give adequate warning about the magnitude, direction, speed and form of the tsunami originating from the tectonic movement off the Northwest coast of Sumatra.
- The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams is reported by the Sunday Telegraph to have said, *'this has made me question God's existence.'*
- Muslim cleric Manajiid blamed the tsunami upon the presence of Westerners or Christians as he views them, on the beaches of these holiday resorts.

Naturally people try to find an answer to the question, *'why'*? Yet in seeking answers to this question people sought something or somebody to blame. Few voices were heard describing this event as a natural disaster, a random event that could happen at any time.

Many Christians have been moved to question why such intense suffering happens. The problem of suffering is a difficult one to answer but in seeking an answer we must remember that God is in complete control and has a longer term perspective than our limited human view of things. When a tragedy such as the Tsunami strikes suddenly and suffering is experienced, questions are asked *'why does an all powerful God allow such pain, anguish and suffering?'* or *'does God really exist?'* Even for sincere Christians who believe in a God that is actively involved in His creation and in their lives, events such as the tsunami cause much heart searching.

CAN PEOPLE EXPECT GOD TO INTERVENE?

Naturally as human beings we grieve for the tragic loss of life of

thousands at Phuket in Thailand, Sri Lanka and other holiday resorts. However consider what they were spending the Christmas season doing. Reflect also about the priorities of the millions who spent huge amounts of money on material things before Christmas. Their priorities were clear - no thought for God and no thought for the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul foretold the attitude of many people today in these words:

‘But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come:
For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money,
boasters, proud, blasphemers...headstrong, haughty, lovers of
pleasure rather than lovers of God’ [2 Timothy 3.1-4].

The description ‘*lovers of pleasure*’ sums up the attitude of the majority of mankind, who show no responsibility towards their Creator and reject His Law. The general reaction of people to the precarious nature of life, is to indulge in an endless pursuit of personal happiness, with the attitude of ‘*eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.*’ It is only when disaster strikes that people turn to God expecting help. Yet He is soon forgotten again once the danger has passed. Mankind rejects God’s way; therefore God leaves man to the folly of his own way.

Indeed why should people expect God to intervene and help those who only seek their own pleasure and reject Him? Whilst it is true that God could easily prevent suffering, if He did so and gave us everything without restriction, the human race would never change. History shows that man would merely become increasingly greedy and self-centred, seeing no need to honour God in their lives. Thus God would never achieve His purpose, which is to teach mankind the wisdom of His ways and produce a people ‘*for his Name*’ [Acts 15.14].

THE REASON FOR SUFFERING

In the beginning God created all things to give Him pleasure and He saw all that He had made as being ‘*good*’ [Genesis 1.31]. God

provided everything needed by man, yet man disobeyed and turned away from God and was thus alienated from his Creator. God's summation of man is that *'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?'* [Jeremiah 17.9]. In short, mankind has turned away from the path of sound spiritual morality, becoming corrupt and spiritually barren as Jesus said:

'...from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and defile a man.' [Mark 7.21-23].

These evil characteristics are the opposite of what God wants from His creation and is the root cause of so much suffering. God will not allow the world and daily life as it exists now to continue indefinitely. The Bible clearly speaks of a time when God will intervene in the affairs of mankind. He will intervene to stop man from destroying both himself and the earth.

THE LESSON TO BE LEARNED

God will ultimately end all suffering, but in His own good time. However, the primary reason for His intervention will not be the saving of all mankind, but that His original purpose with creation will be fulfilled. The wise in heart will consider the problem of suffering and learn from it. Jesus was once told about some people who experienced suffering. We read:

'There were present at that season some who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem?"' [Luke 13.1-4].

The answer was 'no'. These people were no better or worse than any other people. They all died as a result of events over which they had no control. We could all die at any time from natural disasters, disease, accident, famine, war or other causes. The lesson from Jesus was very clear: *'unless you repent you will all likewise perish'* [Luke 13.5].

Some people believe that calamities occur because people are sinners deserving of punishment. It is true that the Bible predicts certain specific world events that will occur for the purpose of punishment. However, most natural disasters are a result of what the wise man Solomon described as *'time and chance'* [Ecclesiastes 9.11,12] and Jesus taught that we can learn a lesson from such events.

So what lessons can be learned? Those people who regard the Bible as the Word of God will seek answers from within its pages. They will see a book containing His message to us, one that has stood the test of time and one that can teach the true meaning of life. It explains that because of mans disobedience, God allows suffering to happen and that we have no grounds for complaint if tragedies like the recent tsunami occur. Jesus taught that those who escape such tragedies and those who hear of such events, should reflect upon the fragility of their own lives, learn, amend their way of life and seek to know their Creator.

THE SUFFERING OF JOB

In the Scriptures we read about Job, of whom it is recorded *'there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil'* [Job 1.8]. Now we may think that such a man would be protected by God from experiencing suffering, yet Job lost everything - his possessions, his family, and his health. Why? Firstly, God intended that Job would learn from his experience. Secondly, future generations would be encouraged to persevere, despite personal trials, by Job's faithfulness under severe suffering.

Such was Job's character that he did not blame God for the suffering he endured but acknowledged:

‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.’ [Job 1.20,21]

Job recognised that we came into the world with nothing and can take nothing with us, God provides all! It was enough for him to trust God to provide, no matter what the circumstances. We read, *‘In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong’* [Job 1.22].

Job felt that he was alienated from God: *‘Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come to His seat!’* [Job 23.3]. He looked for a reason for his suffering, yet his plea to God appeared to go unheeded. God did reply and give an answer but in His own time. In the end because of his faith, patience and endurance, despite intense suffering, Job was greatly rewarded:

‘Now the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; for he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, one thousand yoke of oxen, and one thousand female donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters’ [Job 42.12,13].

A similar situation of suffering may face God’s children at any time and it may appear that our prayers are not answered. Yet like Job we must learn patience, because God will answer prayer, but in His own time and according to His infallible wisdom. The answer may not be what we expect or desire, but it will be an answer that is for our ultimate good. Believers are not exempt from experiencing the adversities of life for as Paul wrote: *‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God’* [Acts 14.22]. The experience of suffering is God’s means of testing our trust in Him, perfecting our character and preparing us for the greater purpose He has in store for those who are faithful.

MORE SUFFERING TO COME

Suffering is the means that God will use to teach mankind the lesson that we are powerless to help ourselves and must turn back to our Creator. The Scriptures foretell a time of trouble and suffering that will be far worse than anything that has gone before, such that if God did not intervene all life would come to an end. In Matthew's gospel record we read:

'For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And if those days had not been shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.' [Matthew 24.21,22].

God will bring this time of immense suffering in order that mankind will finally realise the futility of an existence without Him. God will punish those who defile His creation as we read in the last book of the Bible:

'...you have taken your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and your wrath has come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that you should reward your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth.'

[Revelation 11.17,18]

The Apostle Peter wrote about how God judged the world in the days of Noah, and warned his readers that He will judge the world again saying it is '*reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men*' [2 Peter 3.7]. At the time of Noah we read '*the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and he was grieved in his heart*' [Genesis 6.6]. Why? Because '*the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*' [verse 5].

The age in which we live is no different and God is equally grieved with those who disregard Him and those who distort and change His Word. Peter warns that the time of judgement *'will come as a thief in the night'* [2 Peter 3.10]. It will be totally unexpected and mankind will resist but in vain:

'He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall hold them in derision. Then he shall speak to them in his wrath, and distress them in his deep displeasure: "Yet I have set my King on my holy hill of Zion."' [Psalm 2.4-6]

AN END TO SUFFERING

Jesus the 'King' referred to by the Psalmist, will set up the Kingdom of God, ruling from Zion (Jerusalem) and rewarding those who have obeyed God's Word and put their trust in him. Many who call themselves Christians today do not believe that Jesus will return, yet this belief is the corner stone of the Gospel message preached by Jesus and his Apostles and recorded in the New Testament. The Apostle Peter warned that: *'scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming?"'* [2 Peter 3. 3,4].

However, if we trust and obey God's word, and are baptised into the saving name of Jesus we can enter into an age when there will be no more suffering. God has promised *'eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality'* [Romans 2.7]. The joy of immortality is beautifully expressed in the vibrant words of the prophet Isaiah:

'...they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint' [Isaiah 40.31 KJV].

Jesus Christ is the '*Prince of Peace*' [Isaiah 9.6]. He will rule the world in righteousness turning mankind back to God's way:

'Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established on the top of the mountains, And shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us his ways, And we shall walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem' [Isaiah 2.2,3].

The suffering of past ages will then be long forgotten:

'For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind...' They shall not labour in vain, Nor bring forth children for trouble; For they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the LORD, And their offspring with them. 'It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear.' [Isaiah 65.17-24]

This is what God has promised and this is what will most certainly happen. God's word is certain and will not change. There will be no more suffering for the time will come when:

'...God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away' [Revelation 21.4 KJV].

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Who are the Angels?

THE WRITER TO the Hebrews quoted from the Psalms when he described the work of the angels: *'Who makes His angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire'* [Hebrews 1.7 - compare with Psalm 104.4]. Such a dramatic description of angels may not reflect our own experience in every day life, but perhaps that is because we do not know who the angels are, or are even aware of their existence.

THE ANGELS ARE 'ELOHIM'

We are introduced to the angels very early on in God's Word, in the work of creation itself. The work of God in relation to His creation was carried out by His angels. The angels are a manifestation of His power, and are powerful beings who are energised by the spirit of God and carry out the Divine will. The word translated **'God'** in our English Bible is **'Elohim'** in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament and it literally means **'mighty ones'**. It was these **'Elohim'** or angels who carried out God's work in the creation as recorded in the book of Genesis.

The idea of many angels being involved in creation is shown in Genesis where we read that the **'Elohim'** said *'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness'* [Genesis 1.26]. We read in the book of Job that the *'sons of God shouted for joy'* at the creation [Job 38.7]. In Psalm 8 the word **'Elohim'** is translated **'angels'**: *'For you have made him a little lower than the angels (Elohim)'* [Psalm 8.5]. This verse is quoted in the New Testament to show that it was Jesus who was made *'a little lower than the angels'* in status [Hebrews 2.7]. Angels then, are the **'Elohim'** or **'mighty ones'**, who are a manifestation of God's spirit power.

THE WORK OF THE ANGELS

The original Bible words for angels in Hebrew (*malak*) and Greek (*aggelos*) have the same meaning - messengers or agents. In the first two chapters of the letter to the Hebrews we learn a lot about the status and nature of the angels, because the writer is arguing that Jesus, originally created on a lower status, has obtained through obedience, a superior position than the angels. But what is the work of the angels? We read in the letter to the Hebrews: *'Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?'* [Hebrews 1.14]. God sends out angels to do His work, just as a fountain sends out streams of water from a central source, or just like an optical fibre lamp sends out light along many tiny strands of glass, each gleaming with a spot of light at its tip.

Angels, then, are Divine messengers, spirit agents, obeying implicitly the will of God and acting on God's behalf in dealing with the affairs of this world. A special work of the angels is to look after those who are called to know the Gospel, who have believed and have been baptised by immersion in water into the saving name of Jesus Christ and who, if found worthy *'will inherit salvation.'* In Luke we read *'there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents'* [Luke 15.10]. Again we read in the Psalms: *'The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear him'* [Psalm 34.7]. The Psalms describe vividly the work of the angels in the words *'Bless the LORD, you his angels, who excel in strength, who do his word, heeding the voice of his word. Bless the LORD all you his hosts, you ministers of his, who do his pleasure'* [Psalm 103.20,21].

SPIRITS AND FLAMES OF FIRE

Two aspects of the work of the angels can be seen in the description of angels firstly as *'spirits'* and secondly as *'a flame of fire'*. Often the work of these agents of the Almighty is unseen. We might view these works under the *'spirits'* category. The prevention of an accident, the constant provision of food and all that is necessary to

sustain us in our lives. The arrangement of personal circumstances and significant events that come under the category of Divine providence in the lives of believers. All these are examples of the unseen work of angels in our lives. In relation to the nations and of Israel in particular, we are shown in the book of Daniel and in the symbolic visions of the book of Revelation, how angels supervise the outworking of God's purpose. Daniel told the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar that *'the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, Gives it to whomever he will, and sets over it the lowest of men'* [Daniel 4.17]. He does this through the unseen influence of His angelic agents operating in the lives of men and women.

But not all angelic events are unseen. Some come under the *'flame of fire'* category. There are many examples in Scripture. Moses witnessed an angel who appeared to him in a *'flame of fire'* out of the middle of a bush, when he was first called by God to save His people from Egyptian slavery [Exodus 3.2]. Take for example, the Law given to Moses by the mouth of angels on Mount Sinai. Angelic glory was reflected in the face of Moses when he descended from the mount. The mountain itself was quaking and there was thunder, lightning, fire and smoke *'because the LORD descended upon it in fire'* [Exodus 19.18]. Such was the visible power of God manifested in His agents at that time.

Two angels appeared to Lot and his family and guided them out of Sodom before the city was destroyed by the fire of Divine judgement [Genesis 19.1-22]. We should not forget that God controls the natural elements to fulfil His will even through punishment when necessary: *'I make peace and create calamity'* [Isaiah 45.7]. We should note in passing that God does not create sin, though He has made sorrow and wretchedness to be the sure fruits of sin.

Israel in the wilderness were lead by a pillar of fire to guide them and this was the manifestation of God's guiding angel. The chief of the invisible angelic host who looked after Israel, was later visibly

made known to Joshua at Jericho, as a man with a sword drawn in his hand. He was described as the '*Commander of the army of the LORD*' [Joshua 5.14].

Another example is where an angel appeared to Samson's parents before his birth and then ascended in the flame of the altar as an offering was made [Judges 13.3-21]. Yes, God's ministers have been revealed as '*a flame of fire*'!

APPEARING AS MEN

It is interesting to note that when angels appear to men they are often not recognised as angels, unless of course, the angel announces his Divine message as Gabriel did to Mary the mother of Jesus [Luke 1.26-38]. This is because they appear as ordinary men. Not surprising, since man was created in their image! When Abraham entertained three men as recorded in Genesis 18 he was unaware that they were angels, though from the message that they carried, it is obvious that they were messengers from God. They carried the news that Sarah, Abraham's wife, was to bear a child in her old age. The child was to be the ancestor of the descendant or '*seed*' that Abraham had been promised years before and for which he patiently waited in faith. That '*seed*' was none other than Jesus Christ!

Jacob wrestled with a man, a messenger, who was in fact an angel. He said '*I have seen God (Elohim) face to face, and my life is preserved.*' [Genesis 32.30]. The angels who appeared to the disciples after Jesus ascended into heaven are described as '*two men...in white apparel*' [Acts 1.10].

From the above examples, there is actually no justification from Scripture for the traditional picture of an angel with two large wings! There are, however, examples of dramatic and unmistakable appearances, such as the angel who descended from heaven and rolled away the stone from Christ's tomb. We are told that '*His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow*' [Matthew 28.2]. The shepherds witnessed a '*multitude of the heavenly host*' announcing the birth of Jesus - that must have been an awesome sight [Luke 2.13,14].

THE WORK OF THE ANGELS

The angels are fundamental to the outworking of God's purpose as can be seen from the following statements:

- They gave the promises to Abraham of a 'seed' that should come - that descendant or seed is Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all those who believe [*Genesis 13.15; Galatians 3.16*].
- They gave the Law to Moses (the Word spoken through angels which foreshadowed Christ) [*Hebrews 2.2*].
- They announced the birth of Jesus, both to Mary and the shepherds [*Luke 1.30-35; 2.8-14*].
- They rolled away the stone from the tomb at the resurrection of Jesus [*Matthew 28.1-7*].
- They announced the future return of Jesus to the earth [*Acts 1.11*].
- They will accompany Jesus at his return [*2 Thessalonians 1.7*].

RULERSHIP OF THIS WORLD - NOT THE KINGDOM TO COME

The angels carry out God's work in overseeing the affairs of the nations and events in this world, leading to Christ's return and the establishment of God's Kingdom. They occupy an exalted position for they are immortal (they do not die). They are filled with God's spirit, being a direct manifestation or revealing of His power. Despite this, we are told that Jesus inherited a 'more excellent name' than the angels because he suffered on the cross in order to destroy the power of sin. God has exalted Jesus to sit down 'at the right hand of the Majesty on high' which is where he is now [*Hebrews 1.3,4*].

Followers of Jesus are those who accept his sacrifice as the only

means of acceptable approach to God, and who become saints (called out ones), through baptism into his name. These disciples, his brothers and sisters, are related to the promised reward which Jesus has received. They are related to the promises made to Abraham, which make them heirs *'of the world'* [Romans 4.13] - that is a place of immortal rulership with Christ in his coming kingdom. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that it is not angels who will inherit God's glorious kingdom, or rule it in these words: *'For he has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels'* [Hebrews 2.5]. This is because Christ and his saints - those who have accepted him now and become **'heirs'** will rule together with him. Daniel the prophet wrote *'the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever'* [Daniel 7.18].

'EQUAL TO THE ANGELS'

The nature of angels is promised to those who accept Christ. Today, men and women are mortal, dying creatures because of sin. After Christ's return, there will be a resurrection of the *'just and the unjust'* (Acts 24.15). Those responsible to Christ will be judged and rewarded according to their works [Revelation 20.12]. Those judged worthy of life will, in God's mercy, then attain to that state described by Jesus:

'But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; nor can they die any more, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection' [Luke 20.35,36].

May Jesus soon come, and may you take those vital steps now to become a child of God and a brother or sister of the Lord Jesus Christ, to share the wonderful privileges now enjoyed by the angels of God.

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Bible teaching about...

The Second Coming of Christ

HERE IS A very well known passage from the Bible - you will probably recognise it as words of Jesus:

‘And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also’. [*John 14.3*]

What did Jesus mean when he said, ‘*I will come again*’? A number of people have tried to answer this question, and we ask that you bear with us while we explore what the Bible has to say about it. Be prepared - we may find what the Bible says is different from what is thought in some quarters!

A SECOND COMING?

So where shall we start? Perhaps an Old Testament prophecy that deals with the mission of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah would be good. Let us compare the words of Isaiah with those of Luke, which describes a reading that Jesus gave in the Synagogue. In this comparison we have strong clues about the first and second coming of Christ.

Note that Jesus applied the first part of this prophecy to himself. He told them it was being fulfilled as they listened to him. Who could deny the truth of this? This was at the start of his ministry, and there would shortly be ample evidence before them that he was able to fulfil this role as the gentle preacher who also healed their sick. But it is

‘The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, To console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified’

[Isaiah 61.1-3].

‘And he (Jesus) was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, To preach the acceptable year of the LORD”. Then he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”” *[Luke 4.17-21]*

worthy of note that he did not quote the entire passage in Isaiah. The words he did not read aloud have to do with a future role which was incompatible with the way Jesus actually presented himself at the time.

JESUS IS THE CHRIST

Did Jesus fulfil this prophecy? Clearly he inferred that it was about him. We would be foolish to disagree with his assessment of this, but equally clearly he did not fulfil the entire prophecy, which in fact you will note from the above comparison, continues after the words quoted by Jesus. We need to acknowledge that it appears the work prophesied

has only been half done. There was, and is still more to come!

Jesus himself was quick to distance himself from the practical aspects of his future role as the '*Christ*' or '*anointed*' even though he was very quick to encourage the disciples to believe it to be an accurate representation for him.

A FUTURE WORK

The evidence indicates that the work of Jesus was incomplete when he died and later left the earth after his resurrection. Perhaps we should look at some of those final exchanges with the disciples before he rose from the earth to the right hand of his Father. We find in Acts 1 a few words about the last times the disciples and Jesus were together in person. They asked him about his kingdom, that is the unfulfilled part of his work.

'Therefore, when they had come together, they asked him, saying, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And he said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"' [Acts 1.6-8].

Does this say they were mistaken about the Kingdom? Well, not really. Jesus' response was not to tell them they were mistaken, but to tell them that a lot more work had to be done, a lot of things had still to happen and it would be quite a while before that time was to come.

Shortly after this, Jesus was taken from them, and they watched as he left, ascending into the clouds and out of sight. At this point they were joined by two messengers from God, who had something to tell them. What does the Scripture say about that angelic message?

'And while they looked steadfastly towards heaven as he

went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven" [Acts 1.10,11].

So the very last message they received was that Jesus would return. We need to understand fully too that his return was to be as they saw him go; this is important to really understand, because it means Jesus must return and be recognised just as people recognised him as a person at that time, one who walked among them. He was no figment of their imagination! He did have extraordinary powers after his resurrection, owing to his spirit nature. As far as his public appearances were concerned, he was seen and handled as a being with substance. So remember this, when Jesus returns, he will do so as the 'Christ' and he will return bodily.

HOW WILL WE RECOGNISE THE RETURN?

Jesus himself addressed the manner in which he would return. Consider the record in Matthew:

'Now as he (Jesus) sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?"' [Matthew 24.3].

The disciples linked '*the end of the age*' with the coming of Jesus and he was happy to discuss the issue with them. He gave them a number of signs to be alert for. He warned them not to be taken in by fraudulent premature claims of his return in these words: '*For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be*' [Matthew 24.27]. He advised them that the event of his return would not be hidden, but would be seen as lightning when it strikes and illuminates the whole landscape: '*Then*

the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory' [Matthew 24.30].

This is a very clear description of people witnessing the return of Jesus and all tribes or nations on earth at that, not just a privileged few. There are a number of allusions to the return of Jesus in Matthew chapter 24 and we encourage you to carefully read this chapter.

The return of Jesus Christ is clearly referred to in the days of his life on earth and after he went to heaven. The writings of Paul make many references to this and one notable example of this is found in his first letter to the Thessalonians. Consider the following quotations, one from every chapter:

‘...and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come’ [*1 Thessalonians 1.10*].

‘For what *is* our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?’ [*1 Thessalonians 2.19*].

‘so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints’. [*1 Thessalonians 3.13*]

‘For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.’ [*1 Thessalonians 4.16*]

‘For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.’ [*1 Thessalonians 5.2*]

As you read those quotations, did you notice anything about the characteristics of the second coming? Paul was assured that when Christ comes:

- he will have his saints with him
- there will be a resurrection of some from the dead
- it will be sudden, without warning, like the unexpected '*thief in the night*.'

WHAT WILL CHRIST DO WHEN HE COMES?

This is a good question. It can be summed up in the phrase resurrection and judgement! Paul wrote to Timothy:

'I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom' [2 Timothy 4.1].

Paul clearly wanted Timothy to understand that when Christ comes, he will be the judge of many people, some of whom will have been raised from the dead. Judgement is one of the features of the return of Christ. Some of the teachings of Jesus refer to this too. For example, consider the parable of the sheep and the goats.

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...'

[Matthew 25. 31-34].

Christ will not save everyone after all! Some people are going to be turned away; something to ponder, would you not agree?

SALVATION

The consequences of judgement are vitally important for those who will be judged. In this next passage we read of salvation, which is what will happen to those who pass to the right side of Christ's judgement seat.

'So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for him he will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.' [*Hebrews 9.28*]

Salvation - what does that mean? Another good question but one we must defer for another time. Let it be understood though, that salvation is a very desirable thing and also note how exclusive it is. Salvation is not universal; it is only for those who look for Christ. If this is not a comfortable thought, remember that it is consistent with Christ's teaching about the sheep and the goats.

WORLD DOMINION

The future work of Christ is depicted very clearly in Old Testament prophecy. When God created the world it was His intention that it would give him glory. It is not difficult to see that something went very seriously wrong, because this is not the situation we see today, far from it! Does this mean God has given up? Of course not! His plan revealed by the Old Testament prophets, is still the same but it will be executed rather differently from what could have been. The Old Testament prophecies are a subject in themselves, but we will quote from one of them. This illustrates that one of the consequences of the second coming of Christ will be to destroy all that is wicked and set up institutions which will glorify their Creator.

'And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in

pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever [Daniel 2.44,45].

In this passage Daniel explained to Nebuchadnezzar the great king of Babylon, what would happen in the future. You really should read the entire chapter and think about it. It is truly remarkable. These verses depict a time when God will send Jesus, to destroy the kingdoms of the world and then to establish his own dominion. Daniel was convinced about this and we are too. When it happens, you should recognise it because we have shown you the Scripture which foretells it.

AND YOU?

The Apostle Peter wrote about people '*in the last days*' who would scoff at the idea of Christ returning to set up his kingdom on earth [2 Peter 3.3,4]. He describes them as ignorant. The reason he has not yet come is that it is not quite time in God's calendar. All the evidence is that we are on the last page but that page has not yet been turned to start the new dispensation on this earth. It may be He has held off so that you the reader can have opportunity to believe and obey him - to become one of his called out ones, a saint in other words. Think about this, and take some action while you still have opportunity. All you need is in the Bible, God's Word of truth and we will help you to understand it. The door of opportunity will not remain open for ever! Will you be among the sheep - or the goats?

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Animals of the Bible

The Leopard

THE LEOPARD (*Panthera pardus*) is the largest of the cat family that still survives in the Middle East. The Hebrew word for the **Leopard** is '*Namer*'. It is used eight times in the Bible and the references to it are either figurative or proverbial.

It seems that the name **leopard** was originally given to the big cat now called the cheetah, which was once called the hunting leopard. It varies greatly in size and markings and the average animal is about 70 kilograms (154 pounds) in weight. It is around two metres (79 inches) in length, excluding its nearly one metre long tail and stands some 70 centimetres (28 inches) high at the shoulder. It can, however, grow much larger, equaling the size and weight of most men.

The ground colour of its coat is typically yellowish above and white below. Dark spots are generally arranged in rosettes over much of the body and the ground tint within the rosettes is sometimes a darker yellow. This variegated colouring of its fur gives the leopard a marvellous camouflage against most backgrounds. The leopard's beautiful pelt has often been used to form part of the royal robes of kings and queens.

The **leopard** is a solitary animal and is mainly nocturnal in habit. It is an agile climber and immensely strong. It can carry more than its own weight and frequently lifts and stores its kills high in the branches of a tree. It feeds upon any animals it can overpower, from small rodents to waterbuck, but generally preys on the smaller and medium-sized antelopes and deer. It sometimes takes livestock and will attack

human beings. There is no definite breeding season; the female usually produces three cubs. The animal can take to water easily and is a good swimmer. The leopards that survive in the Negev in Israel are listed as an endangered species.



Negev Leopard

The prophet Jeremiah refers to the **leopard** in a way that has become a proverb in common use even today, '*Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the **leopard** its spots?*' [Jeremiah 13.23].

The prophet was making a point here that we can also take to heart. He was condemning the nation of Israel for their waywardness and saying in effect that these chosen people of God were so set in their evil ways and so stubborn and rigid in their habits that they were beyond redemption. There was as much possibility, in Jeremiah's time, of a change of heart coming over them, as it was for the **leopard** being able to change its natural colouring!

Jeremiah was obviously familiar with the leopard and its habits, for again, when he talks about the enemies of Israel being used by God to punish them, he says, '*A **leopard** will watch over their cities. Everyone who goes out from there shall be torn in pieces, because their transgressions are many*' [Jeremiah 5.6].

Here the prophet is describing the **leopard's** practice of lying in wait, sometimes on the branch of a tree, ready to drop on its prey. In this instance he was telling the Israelites that their enemies, like the **leopard**, were eyeing them, watching and waiting for a chance to pounce and tear them apart and devour them.

Daniel gives us an example of these predatory nations that would come upon Israel. He gives us a prophetic vision of beasts representing four empires that would devour Israel. The third empire he describes like this: *'...like a **leopard**, which had on its back four wings of a bird. The beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it'* [Daniel 7.6].

A study of Daniel's prophecies will help us to identify this figurative **leopard** empire as Greece, led by Alexander the Great. The speed, agility, the **leopard-like** strategy and cunning ability of Alexander's armies to overcome forces much stronger than themselves, is used descriptively here in God's word to foretell the future from that period onwards and warn Israel of troubles to come.

Another of God's prophets, Habakkuk, also tells us about a predatory invader: *'For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation...They are terrible and dreadful...Their horses also are swifter than **leopards**...Their cavalry comes from afar'* [Habakkuk 1.6,8]. The Chaldeans or Babylonians did come as swiftly as the **leopard** and

figuratively devoured and destroyed Israel carrying the people away as prey to feed on them as captives in Babylon.



The places inhabited by the **leopard** are mentioned in The Song of Solomon: *'Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse. Look from the top of Amana...Senir and Hermon...from the mountains of the **leopards**'* [Song 4.8]. These mountains in the Lebanon range were one of the regions loved by the leopard in times past with its

large forests of cedar trees, pines and oaks which like the leopard, are mostly now gone.

We also find in the Bible a number of places are named after the leopard. Nimrah means 'leopardess' and Beth-Nimrah is 'house of the leopardess'. Nimrim, a district northeast of the Dead Sea means 'leopard'. All such names point to these places being at one time areas inhabited by and identified with the animal.

It is Isaiah's prophetic words that take us into the future. He speaks of a time that is coming when, *'The **leopard** shall lie down with the young goat.. and a little child shall lead them.. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' [Isaiah 11.6,9].*

This is one prophetic view of the Kingdom of God. There are many others that tell of the future time when God's earth will become a place of harmony. No longer will animals prey on each other and devour one another. No longer will human beings seek to do the same.

The **leopard** may not be able to '*change its spots*' but as Isaiah tells us, there will be great changes in the hearts of men and also in the instincts and the feeding habits of predatory animals. All creation will reflect the moral and spiritual beauty of the Almighty. The paradise that was lost by Adam and Eve in Eden long ago will be restored.

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Kent, England

The Christadelphians (Dawn Fellowship) believe the Bible (Old and New Testaments) to be the wholly inspired and infallible Word of God. Its principal theme is the salvation of mankind through the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the setting up of the kingdom of God under his rulership when he returns to the earth.

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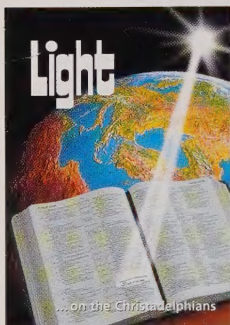
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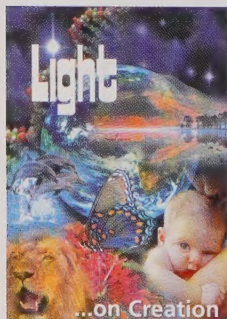
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